

Review of *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures* by Erin Suzuki (Temple University Press)

by [Sandra So Hee Chi Kim](#) | [Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 \(Spring 2022\)](#)

ABSTRACT Erin Suzuki's *Ocean Passages* is a sustained analysis of how various narratives of "ocean passages" disrupt and revise hegemonic constructions of the Pacific. Through analyses of contemporary Indigenous Pacific and Asian American literatures, Suzuki demonstrates what new paradigms can emerge by bringing Asian and Pacific Islander passages across the same sea into critical relationality.

KEYWORDS [Indigenous peoples](#), [Asian American](#), [decolonial](#), [literature](#), [transpacific](#)

Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures. By Erin Suzuki. Temple University Press, 2021, 268 pp. (paperback). ISBN 143992094X. US List: \$39.95.

Transpacific studies is facing a moment of reckoning. Roughly a decade ago, the field established itself through pathbreaking volumes like *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society*, edited by Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, and *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins.¹ These works introduced a fresh approach to scholarship that explored the connections and potential cross-pollinations among Asian studies, Asian American studies, cultural studies, and American studies. Transpacific methods introduced a way to move beyond simply identifying Orientalist binarisms of "East" versus "West" toward actually disrupting longstanding disciplinary boundaries that European colonialism and Cold War imperialism produced. Moreover, transpacific studies has created a much-needed paradigm shift that provincializes the United States and the "West" at the same time that it refuses to see the US as disconnected from Asia. The transpacific framework has opened up new ways for scholars to think about the dynamics of US empire in Asia as well the movement of people, cultures, ideas, and capital from Asia into the US.

At the same time that transpacific studies produced such generative scholarship, scholars in Asian American and Pacific Islander studies have articulated an important critique of the field: that its transnational approach takes for granted settler colonial paradigms of the nation-state.² The framework of the transpacific in practice has perpetuated colonial dynamics of indigenous erasure even as it has sought to critique modern empire. Recently Aimee Bahng and Erin Suzuki have written about the importance of cultivating an “ocean-centered transpacific studies” in order to move us toward what Lisa Yoneyama calls a “decolonial genealogy of the transpacific.”³ Suzuki models what an ocean-centered turn in transpacific Asian American studies could look like in a field like literary studies in her new book, *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures*.

Ocean Passages examines how movement within, through, and across the Pacific Ocean mediates the subjectivities of Asian American and Indigenous Pacific communities in the wake of colonial conflicts that have shaped the region. Through a sustained analysis of how various narratives of “ocean passages” disrupt and revise hegemonic constructions of the Pacific, Suzuki demonstrates what new orientations, concepts, and openings can emerge by bringing Asian and Pacific Islander passages across the same sea into a critical analytic of relation. Her comparative methodology focuses on what Epeli Hau’ofa calls “stories of ocean passage” as they intersect and overlap in contemporary Indigenous Pacific and Asian American literatures. The figure of passage opens up different critical possibilities that can emerge from the prefix “trans-” in transpacific studies; Suzuki explores not only the flows of peoples, objects, or ideas between continents, but also how these flows create their own seascape epistemologies and subjectivities. As such, Suzuki argues that a transpacific studies that relies only on “abstractive or extractive visions of the Pacific” reproduces the very neoliberal practices it critiques and urges us to consider it instead as a relational, polycentric space of diverse communities and cultures. Suzuki’s decolonial transpacific approach performs three important moves: 1) it attends to Indigenous Pacific epistemologies and ontologies, 2) it accounts for the entangled histories of diverse communities and cultures, and 3) it examines their constantly shifting and relative positionalities in and across the sea.

Each chapter in the book addresses an interrelated form of oceanic passage that brings transpacific Asian American and Indigenous Pacific literary and cultural texts into dialogic relation: militarized passages, refugee passages, commercial passages, embodied passages, and lastly, virtual passages. In “Militarized Passages: Securing the Sea,” Suzuki deftly explores militarized oceanic passages and the racialized, neocolonial nature of US occupation and militarization of the Pacific Ocean from the time of the Cold War through readings of James George’s *Ocean Roads* alongside James Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific*. Her analysis brings into focus how the experiences of crossing the ocean undermine and resist militarized claims of nation-states that seek to territorialize and

securitize the space of the ocean under the aegis of "liberty." In doing so, Suzuki draws out the range of new connections and networks formed among communities affected by militarized violence, and alternative archives of the transpacific.

Her second chapter, "Refugee Passages: In the Wake of War," focuses on another aspect of militarized ocean space through the figure of the refugee by reading the novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Vietnamese American writer Lê Thị Diễm Thúy together with the poetry of Marshallese writer Kathy Jentil-Kijiner. What this juxtaposition of refugee experience in and across the Pacific yields is remarkable insight into the neocolonial entanglements and interconnections between environmental trauma and war trauma, between the experiences of Pacific Island dispossession and Asian American displacement.

Again creating surprising juxtapositions, "Commercial Passages: On Cycles and Circulations," looks at the work of Chinese American authors Ken Liu and Maxine Hong Kingston alongside the work of Tongan writers Epeli Hau'ofa and Konai Helu Thaman. She looks to how these authors depict the enormous labor required for commercial passages of people, communications, and commodities through ocean space that has been deterritorialized in service of the flows of capital and its neocolonial dynamics. Against the abstractions of capital, Suzuki shows how these authors emphasize the materiality of ocean space and the bridge it serves for diverse alternative cultures of circulation.

"Embodied Passages: "Local" Motions and the Settler Colonial Body Politic" examines Hawai'i as a specific site of where Indigenous Pacific and immigrant ocean passages intersect, specifically through the tensions and contradictions of the figuration of the multicultural "local" body which simultaneously invokes and erases Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian) indigeneity. By focusing on how the work of Hawai'i-born Japanese American author Lois-Ann Yamanaka and Kanaka Maoli poet Brandy Nālani McDougall represent the embodied experiences of moving through and with the ocean, Suzuki demonstrates how we can reimagine emplaced identity in ways that meaningfully supports Kanaka Maoli sovereignty.

In her final chapter, "Virtual Passages: Pacific Futures," Suzuki rounds out the study by analyzing how all forms of ocean passage—whether militarized, refugee, commercial, or embodied—evolve in tandem with contemporary technologies to articulate different futures of the Pacific Ocean. She turns to the work of Pacific Island poets Robert Sullivan (Māori), Emelihter Kihleng (Pohnpei), and Craig Santos Perez (Chamorro) to read alongside *A Tale for the Time Being* by Japanese American-Canadian novelist Ruth Ozeki, and demonstrates how these representations disrupt the hegemonic narrative of transpacific futures that are governed by a teleology of capitalist progress that requires securitization. For Suzuki, the way these texts highlight the cyclical within the oceanic, and alternative temporalities

shaped by Oceanic epistemologies. They open up for us oceanic imaginaries and paradigms of relational navigation that can help us dismantle colonial networks and infrastructures, and explore alternative ways of living and being together in the world.

Bahng and Suzuki question whether the term “transpacific” can ever be more than provisional (12). While the transpacific is a social construct like any other geographical category, and therefore should be as provisional as any other social construct, *Ocean Passages* demonstrates how transpacific studies can evolve and continue to be a generative framing for counterhegemonic, decolonial research across disciplines. Centering the Indigenous Pacific—which is a fundamentally anti-imperial orientation at the same time that it disrupts the legitimacy of the modern nation-state—should have been vital to the work that transpacific studies set out to do in the first place.

Notes

1. Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, eds., *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society* (Singapore: World Scientific Pub. Co., 2012); Viet Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, eds., *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014). ↩
2. For example, see the work of Candance Fujikane, Jonathan Okamura, Dean Saranillo, Lisa Kahaleole Hall, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, Aimee Bahng, Jinah Kim, Nitasha Sharma, and Quynh Nhu Le. Jinah Kim and Nitasha Sharma have pointed out how the increased use of “Trans-Pacific” as a keyword in Asian American Studies tends “to fly over Oceania, erasing Pacific Islanders while invoking the Pacific.” Jinah Kim and Nitasha Sharma, eds., “Interventions in Pacific Islands Studies and Trans-Pacific Studies,” special issue, *Critical Ethnic* 7, no. 2 (2021). ↩
3. Erin Suzuki and Aimee Bahng, “The Transpacific Subject in Asian American Culture,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*, 2021. ↩

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